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ABSTRACT

USENET is a system of special interest discussion groups called newsgroups, to which readers can send or post messages which are then distributed to other computers in the network. A common network is the Internet, but other networks may carry USENET as well. There are thousands of newsgroups, with a wide range of conversations on topics such as computer technology, gardening, rock and roll, and education. Each newsgroup is a discussion group focused around a specific topic. The network site administrator can provide site-specific information on accessing USENET. Most systems allow for searching the names of the newsgroups by keyword. Each newsgroup has its own set of rules. Some newsgroups are moderated; in others, there is no screening of messages. Some hints for joining a newsgroup include writing concisely, sticking to the topic, responding politely, providing references, avoiding humor or sarcasm when it could be misinterpreted, and proofreading. The following should be avoided: advertising, writing in all capitals, posting irrelevant material, and posting surveys. (AEF)

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Consumer Guide - June 1995:
"USENET Newsgroups"

by US Dept. of Education

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U.S. Department of Education

Consumer Guide

Number 12 June 1995

USENET Newsgroups

Want to compare notes with educators around the world on educational topics from assessment to zoology? Need hints on the best techniques for maintaining classroom discipline? Want to discuss the role of business in the public schools? All without leaving your school or home? Then maybe you should cruise onto the information superhighway and explore the USENET.

What is USENET?

USENET is a system of special interest discussion groups, called newsgroups, to which readers can send, or "post," messages which are then distributed to other computers in the network. A common network is the Internet, but other networks may carry USENET, too, and the Internet contains far more than just USENET.

USENET started as a network linking university personnel who needed to discuss technical computer issues, but the talk rapidly expanded beyond work, and USENET has grown far beyond its collegiate beginnings. Today there are thousands of newsgroups, with conversations ranging from discussions of computer technology; to gardening; to rock and roll; plus education, of course.

People all over the world—but most commonly in the U.S., Canada, Europe, Australia, and Japan—use the USENET, and the newsgroups on the net reflect a wide range of interests. Each newsgroup is a discussion group focused around a specific topic, and some are much more specific than others: "rec.gardens" users may discuss all aspects of gardening, but in "rec.gardens.roses" you'll want to limit your conversation to just roses.

Accessing USENET

Your network site administrator will be able to tell you if you have access to USENET newsgroups. If you do, the administrator will be able to provide site-specific information on access. The site administrator will also control what newsgroups you have access to, and while your site may carry only a subset of available newsgroups, you may be able to request that groups be added to the list.

Finding Newsgroups

With thousands of newsgroups to choose from, how can you find the ones of interest to you? Most systems will allow you to search the names of the newsgroups by keyword: search for "education" if you're interested in general education issues, or "k12" if your primary interest is grades K through 12. Education-related newsgroups include:

alt.education.research
alt.education.disabled
alt.education.distance
misc.education.multimedia
misc.education.science
k12.chat.teacher
k12.ed.science
k12.ed.math

But, these are only a few of the education newsgroups, with more being formed all the time.

Joining the Conversation

Joining a newsgroup is a bit like joining a conversation at a party: it pays to listen carefully to what's being said and to gain a sense of the tone of the conversation before jumping in and voicing an opinion.

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Your best bet is to "lurk" in the newsgroup for a while; that is, read the postings, but don't post replies, until you've learned the "netiquette"—net etiquette—of the group.

Each newsgroup has its own set of rules, some written out in its own FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions); others unwritten and best learned by reading the postings and gaining a sense of the tone and the topics discussed. Some newsgroups are moderated, meaning someone reads, screens, and occasionally modifies notes before posting them. On other newsgroups, there's no screening of messages. This means the tone of the newsgroups varies greatly. However, there are certain rules that are common to most newsgroups, as noted below. You should read the general USENET FAQ for your system, and for the newsgroup, but if you're anxious to join in right away, you'll be on safer ground if you follow these few simple rules.

Some Do's

- Write clearly and concisely, and avoid "cute" spellings. Your postings will be read by people all over the world, many of whom do not have English as a first language.
- Stick to the topic of the newsgroup and to the message to which you are replying.
- Respond politely, even when baited by other users. Unfortunately, the anonymity of the net brings out the worst in some users. Your best bet: ignore them, as responding may only encourage their inappropriate behavior.
- Provide references to back up your views. This will help other readers who are seeking information.
- Be very cautious about using humor or sarcasm. Many of your readers simply won't get the joke, with the result being misunderstandings and hurt feelings. If you must use humor, mark it with a smiley face — :-) — or a grin—<g>— so all will know that you're joking.
- Read, re-read, and think twice about your reply before you post it. What you say is going to be read by people all over the world, and maybe by your colleagues and friends. Be sure it reflects your best thoughts and ideas.

Some Don'ts

- Do not advertise on the net unless you are posting to a group that specifically accepts advertising. If the word "forsale" doesn't appear in the newsgroup name, err on the side of safety and don't post that ad! Newsgroup users are quite sensitive on this point, particularly if the posting is from a commercial site. They will retaliate if you persist.
- DO NOT WRITE IN ALL CAPS! This is called shouting, and is considered just as impolite as if you walked into a party and began talking very, very loudly. You'll be told to shush or worse.
- Do not post irrelevant material on a newsgroup, and do not "spam," that is, send the same material to many different, unrelated newsgroups. Many users have to pay for their USENET access, and they will not appreciate receiving messages unrelated to the topic of the newsgroup.
- Do not post surveys on the net. Most long-time users are tired of such requests, and the few people who do respond will provide you with very nonrepresentative results.

And a Few Final Hints

Netters have developed their own vocabulary, so to get you started, here are a few hints of what some of their abbreviations stand for:

IMHO	In my humble opinion
BTW	By the way
ROTFL	Rolling on the floor laughing

You'll learn more as you read the postings. Hope to see you on the information superhighway!

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